

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Barbara A. Hutchinson
Proper 6 Year C

"Do you see this woman?" This may sound like a simple question, or one with a simple answer. This is the question that Jesus asks of Simon in our gospel story, and one that exemplifies Jesus' prophetic role in bringing in God's new kingdom: where all are seen, where the dignity of all is respected, where all are treated as God's beloved.

In Jesus' question, (one to which there is no simple answer,) Jesus shines the light on the complicity of Simon in a social structure and system wherein women are made invisible, where their voices are hushed or silenced, where their rights are ignored, where they are blamed as victims, where they are caused to live a lifetime in shame for nothing they did, but for what was done unto them, where no one but Jesus speaks up for them.

We can picture this unnamed woman as she enters the home of Simon, a Pharisee, who has invited Jesus to dinner. There is mild chaos as people mill about near the doorway, clamoring for a glimpse of this celebrated guest. In the midst of this scene, a nearly invisible woman moves silently forward, slunk low to the floor, and approaches Jesus from behind, like another woman in the crowd we know of, who is considered impure due to a condition she neither asked for nor had any control over, but which ostracized her to the margins.

It is only when this unnamed woman touches Jesus that she becomes visible to Simon. Her tears of gratitude wash away the dirt on Jesus' feet, dusty from travel, and her long, silky black hair paints the fragrant offering of the ointment in the alabaster jar. Her love explodes in a nearly embarrassing scene.

The reputation of this unnamed woman precedes her and her actions confirm Simon's preconceived and self-righteous attitude: he mutters under his breath that she is a sinner to be avoided at all costs and unworthy of his attention. Simon uses Jesus' acceptance of this sinful woman's gift of love as evidence that Jesus cannot be a prophet, for clearly a prophet would know this woman's sinfulness.

In his question to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" Jesus is turning the tables on the Jewish understanding of God's righteousness.

God's righteousness means and has always meant what God desires, demands, hopes for and from us so that we can be in right relationship with each other, God, our created world, and ourselves.

The meaning of righteousness has remained the same, but how we get there drastically shifted with Jesus' question to Simon. Simon, a Pharisee, a keeper of the

religious law, believed that to be in a right relationship involved separating himself from those who were impure, with the focus not on extricating himself from sinfulness within, but by fracturing society, so that the sinful and impure were ostracized to the margins, and a law-abiding Jew would order his life so as never to be in contact or associate with anyone who was sinful. This could be a widow, a victim of a crime, a hemorrhaging woman, a leper, a blind person, a foreigner, a pagan, or someone who came in contact with the dead.

In contrast, Jesus ate with the tax collectors, healed the blind, touched lepers, showed compassion for widows, healed the Roman soldier's slave, always demonstrating that to be in right relationship with God did not mean avoiding the marginalized and those considered unworthy by society, but by embracing all people.

There are two sinners in today's story, coming from different circumstances: the nameless woman who freely admits her sinfulness and who receives the overwhelming power of divine forgiveness which propels her into a state of lavish gratitude, and the Pharisee, who distances himself from his own sinfulness, by laying the blame on others. He receives little in return.

It is only when the unnamed woman touches Jesus that she becomes visible to Simon. The question before us today is: "have you been, can you be, would you be willing to be touched by Jesus enough that you can be a follower of Jesus? Could you can be a part of the Jesus movement now that says, in today's society, in our world, the voices of women, or any marginalized group, should not be hushed or silenced, that it is not okay that victims are blamed for the crimes done unto them, that all people should be respected as God's beloved, and that those placed on the margins by a few believers in their own self-righteousness need to be brought into the center by us, for that is what Jesus makes evident in his question to Simon we read today, "Do you see this woman?". This is Jesus' call to each of us: to enter into our vocation of love that makes all people visible, not just before God, but also before each one of us.

To do this, we need to look closely at the model this unnamed woman offers us. There is much debate about how this happens or the order of it, but in this text, three important parts of God's realm come together: a recognition of human sinfulness, divine forgiveness, and a lavish expression of gratitude.

Did human gratitude follow divine forgiveness of her sinfulness? Did Jesus' forgiveness, in his accepting her, allow her to share her sinfulness with Jesus, and, in doing so turn her heart to gratitude?

Many scholars have debated the progression in this passage. But I bet it doesn't matter. I bet that sometimes we are overwhelmed by the intimate presence of Jesus' love and, suddenly, we find that we can trust Jesus enough to be honest about where we are out of right relationship, and in that moment of humility and forgiveness, our

hearts explode with gratitude. And I bet that sometimes, we come forward in deep recognition of our complete unworthiness, unprompted by anything God has offered, feel the unbidden presence of Jesus' forgiveness, and gratitude bubbles up.

The reality is that there is a part in each of us which is this unnamed woman, who carries her own sins, transparent to her as the alabaster jar, as well as who carries the burden of sins attached to her by self-righteous people who want to keep her invisible. A part of each of us is this unnamed woman who openly and willingly offers her whole self to Jesus and in return receives abundant grace and a heart turned toward lavish generosity. And yet, I imagine, there is also a part of each of us which is Simon, the one who would rather name the sin of others, would rather push others to the margins, would really rather not see the other, instead of looking inwardly and looking honestly at our own places where we miss the mark.

This story reminds me of a time when my sister and I would spend hours looking at this publication called Highlights where a picture would hide numerous images, which we delighted in finding. For some reason, I remember this most sitting on the floor in the doctor's waiting room, for it was time when you showed up to see the doctor when you needed and appointments weren't made. I remember the cover of the book was orange and white and each page held a treasure trove of scenes that contained hidden images. In the curls of a girl's hair, for instance, you may see the curling tail of a kitty cat and then discover how the cat's whiskers were a part of the hair bow.

I think Jesus is saying in this story today that within each one of us is a hidden image of someone who honestly claims our own flaws and receives grace with humility, and someone who casts our flaws upon others, with a self-righteous attitude, that, like the Pharisee, works harder to divide our society into the shameful and ourselves, rather than to look at our own shamefulness.

My question to you this morning is "Can you come to Jesus, with your alabaster jar in hand, ready to make your life right with him, ready to pour out something precious, something of your goodness to offer, or something that needs to be washed away by Jesus' tears of compassion and forgiveness, or something you've been taught to belittle or dismiss, because your voice has been silenced over the years." "Will you break the seal that imprisons the treasures, the brokenness and fullness, within your being, so the world can be changed?" For when we can break open that jar, we are emboldened and empowered to begin to pull apart the social structures and systems that make people invisible. For that's the work of Jesus we're called to continue. Amen.